DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 200 981 CS 206 252

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TITLE From Language to Voice to Writing, or How Writers Talk on Paper.
PUB DATE Mar 81
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (32nd, Dallas, TX, March 26-28, 1981).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; *Discourse Analysis; *Editing; *Language Styles; *Speech Communication; Teaching Methods; *Writing (Composition)
IDENTIFIERS *Audience Awareness; *Personal Writing

ABSTRACT

While editors have no way of encoding most of the features of the human voice, they are often able to use punctuation and other devices to give the impression of speech. While retaining many distinctive features of a personal voice is possible in writing, considerations of voice are inseparable from considerations of textual features and audience adaptation. From an examination of 1,500 pages of edited transcript from the oral biography project, "Bill Haber Remembers," several grammatical differences between speaking and writing emerge: pronoun preference, parenthetic syntactic embedding, parallelism, and tense switching. Putting personal voices on paper depends almost entirely on understanding who the audiences for a given text are and what they require and expect. Editing, like speaking and writing, always depends on the audience. This has several implications for student personal writing: (1) teachers should emphasize that voice, text, and audience are interlocking concerns; (2) students do have control over the voice or persona they put on paper; (3) teachers should teach students to look critically at their work in terms of the conventions of writing; and (4) teachers should instruct students to anticipate their audiences. (HOD)

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From Language to Voice to Writing, or How Writers Talk on Paper

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What is personal writing? Is it writing we intend for our eyes only--a shopping list, or a diary entry, or a closet poem we wouldn't want our closest friends to see? Is it writing about ourselves that we do share with others, writing that is somehow self-revealing--"How I Spent My Week at Club Med," Susan's "public diary" intended for the readers of Cosmopolitan; or From Puzzles to Portraits, James Clifford's account of sleuthing for facts about the young Sam Johnson; or An Unfinished Woman, Lillian Hellman's recollections of growing up and growing older? Or is personal writing any writing that sounds more like a conversation than like a 4 C's paper?

I intend today to answer none of these questions directly, except to say that writing that sounds personal on paper--as though a friend were giving an opinion or telling a story--is writing that sounds like speaking. It has a certain intimacy, a certain style we associate with speech, but it differs from speaking in being bound by the conventions of writing while being free of the vocabulary restrictions and syntactic meanderings of speech.

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Personal writing has a quality that our students, and we, ourselves, often find difficult to achieve. When we write as we speak, we rarely write well. And when we write as we would never speak, we never write well. In this essay, I would like to discuss what putting a voice on paper means by looking closely at the process of converting speech to writing in oral biography.

Since oral biography is a form we are less familiar with than fiction or poetry or drama--unless, of course, we read everything Studs Terkel writes--I will show you what happens when speaking becomes writing. First, I will show you how segments of oral interviews were transformed into written prose, then I will suggest how we can help our students put their personal voices on paper.

Transforming Speech into Writing

The observations I will make are based on my review of editorial markings and changes I observed on 1500 pages of edited transcripts from the oral biography project, Bill Haber Remembers, sponsored by the University of Michigan in 1977, and completed in 1980. Because the transcripts of Haber's taped interviews were edited four times by two very experienced editors, the markings provide a useful and accurate survey of the problems of turning personal speech into written prose. The changes the editors made fall into three general categories:

- Changes to capture, as clearly as possible, the "voices" of the speakers;
- Changes to meet the standards of a written text;
- And changes to assure audience comprehension.

In terms of capturing the "voices" of the speakers, the editors used two criteria: in the voices of the interviewers, they strove for impersonality by:

- omitting personal features of speech;
- abbreviating questions so they were clear, specific and entirely factual;
- and correcting errors.

But for Haber, himself, the editors strove to capture the personal speaking voice by:

- fixing only those idiosyncratic features which interfered with meaning;
- including expressions of feeling and gestures (expressions such as "with tears in his eyes");
- and omitting false starts, ambiguities, and irrelevancies.

That there were considerable difficulties in achieving Haber's "voice" on paper is illustrated by the impossibility of communicating in writing such vocal features as pitch, rhythm and phrasing, juncture, and stress. While the editors had no way of encoding most of the features of the spoken voice, they were often able to use punctuation and other devices to give the impression of speech. One example of their editorial ingenuity occurs on page 471 of the transcript.

Winning the Harvard doctoral fellowship, 1926; volume published by Harvard, 1930.

VOICE

subject/pronoun ref clarifying phrase

for Research in Industrial Relations. He had been in existence for a year. One evening at the home of Richard T. Ely, attending a seminar, my wife called. "Got a telegram." You know, it could have happened yesterday with a strong emotion in his voice, tears in his eyes, a

(spelling)

gesture/feeling

interruptive question

~~Halpern: So that means that you left?~~

tense

Haber: I got the fellowship! Three thousand dollars! That was an assistant professor's salary! And a thousand dollars for travel expenses! To do this thesis. You saw it?

intonation

fact

I'll show it to you because who wrote the foreword, Frank Ur- Fraissig. Funded by the Wertheim Committee.

Clarity

error/personal speech

And published

~~Halpern: Printed~~ by the Harvard University Press. ~~Now that's impressive.~~

X

11- clarity

Haber: It was the second volume they published. The first was by James Hauser wrote one on industrial relations. ~~I never heard of it again.~~ I read it.

this one

Talking to self

clarity/personal speech

Halpern: Oh, you were at Michigan State already by the time Harvard published your thesis?

Haber: Yes, 1930, it was finished in 1927 when I got my degree. But Harvard was exacting, they made me--they had a woman on their printing staff who really went through it with me. Fanny typed it. Let me see if I mentioned that. Looks at the volume.]

syntax retained

(sp)

gesture

Here you can see, in the check-marked lines, how the editors included a gesture at the end of the first and last passages; included exclamation points for Haber--while removing them for the interviewers; and corrected grammatical features which might be confusing.

While retaining many distinctive features of a personal voice is, indeed, possible in writing--as Mark Twain and Robert Frost, among others, have shown--considerations of voice are inseparable from considerations of textual features and audience adaptation.

It is clear from this transcript that the editors repaired such textual features as format coherence, paragraphing, spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and transcribal errors. But perhaps the most fascinating result of this research project is that it illuminated several specific grammatical differences between speaking and writing. Among these are:

- pronoun reference;
- parenthetic syntactic embedding;
- parallelism;
- and tense switching.

The following portion of the original and edited transcript illustrates these differences.

ORIGINAL TRANSCRIPT

I discussed it* with Roger Heyns, who was then the Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and we agreed that it* was to be done,* and I authorized a person* who was present at my meeting, I believe Professor Newcomb--who was probably

a member of the Strike Committee, which was meeting that very evening*--to indicate that I would be agreeable to making all necessary arrangements for a teach-in,* including the provision of electronic equipment for amplifying, so that it* could be heard in all the auditoriums simultaneously, and in the halls for those that could not get into the auditoriums.

EDITED TRANSCRIPT

I discussed the teach-in* with Roger Heyns, then Vice-President for Academic Affairs, and we agreed that it was to be done*. I authorized Professor Newcomb,* who was probably a member of the Strike Committee, to inform the committee at the meeting that night* that I had agreed to make all necessary arrangements for a teach-in.* I offered to provide electronic equipment for amplification, so that the speeches* could be heard in all the auditoriums simultaneously and in the halls, for those who could not get into the auditoriums.

If we compare the starred items in the first (original) paragraph with the starred items in the second (edited) paragraph, we see the differences listed above. The first, second, and last stars in the first paragraph, for example, show unclear pronoun references, the first and last of which were repaired in the edited version. Instead of "I discussed <u>it</u> with Roger," the editors used "I discussed <u>the teach-in</u> with Roger," which also clarified the

second it. Instead of "so that it could be heard," they wrote, "so that the speeches could be heard."

At the third star, the insidious rambling and overembedding associated with speech begins. You will notice here that the editors were able to break the original 102-word oral sentence into three clear, accurate, and grammatically correct written sentences. They untangled the original sentence by making the beginnings of the three new sentences parallel: "I discussed," "I authorized," and "I offered." They also aligned the verb tenses more consistently--as they did in other passages of the transcript when Haber switched, as he often did, into the present tense.

Each of these changes, as you can see, clarifies the text grammatically for the reading audience. But the editors also made important changes of a non-grammatical nature to adapt the tapes for readers. Such changes, illustrated on the marked VOICE transcript above, include:

- organizing for logical order;
- adding factual information;
- and making connections.

To make the transcript as logical as possible for readers, the editors cut out interruptive material, as illustrated by the omissions between lines 5 and 6 and lines 14 and 15 of the VOICE page. They also added factual documentation in lines 9 and 13 by filling in full names. And they made connections with earlier and later information in the text by clarifying where Haber was when actions occurred--an important concern throughout the editing.

Nor were the editorial choices arbitrary. Putting personal voices on paper depends almost entirely on understanding who the audiences for a given text are and what they require and expect. Since the editors knew that this text was being prepared for the Michigan Historical Collections and would be used by scholars, journalists, and local historians, logical ordering, factual documentation, and making connections were essential. On the other hand, had the text been intended for use by psychologists, each digression, each pause might have carried meaning; and had the tapes been intended for use by linguists, many vocalic features--such as "uhms"--might have been retained and the text marked, perhaps, for stress, pitch, and other linguistic signals. Editing, like speaking and writing, always depends on the audience.

Putting Student Voices on Paper

We return, then, to the question with which we started--what is personal writing? If you will agree with me that it is writing which sounds like speaking, then the research I have just described suggests several implications for teaching.

First--Although we want to encourage our students to have a personal voice on paper--in their informal and even in their formal work--we must emphasize that voice, text, and audience are interlocking concerns when personal writing goes public. As Wayne Booth, Janet Emig, Linda Flower, Barry Kroll, Lev Vygotsky, and others have suggested, written language will not be heard, understood, or favorably received unless it meets certain textual and audience requirements.

Second--We can teach students that they do, indeed, have control over the voice or persona they put on paper. If they can sound friendly, hostile, silly, childish, mature, or authoritative when they speak, they can also sound any way they choose when they write. Giving students opportunities to play with different registers or dialects, to compare David Copperfield's "personal voice" with Huck Finn's or Holden Caulfield's, to write letters or poems or plays with a variety of "personal voices" will show them directly what the editors of the Haber project learned indirectly: that certain idiosyncratic features of speech are important; that gestures or other details add vividness; and that phrases and sentences have to be clear to sound right on paper.

Third--We can teach students to write with as personal a voice as they wish the first time through, then to look critically at their work in terms of the conventions of writing--and not only at the obvious conventions of paragraphing or punctuation, but also at the specific conventions which differ in speaking and writing. As the Haber text suggests, it is possible to sound too oral on paper--by over-embedding sentences or using pronouns too loosely. Sounding personal on paper often means consciously trading habits of speech for conventions of writing.

And finally--We can help our students produce an appropriate and convincing voice on paper by having them anticipate their audiences--and what they, as writers, want to achieve with those audiences. I am often astonished, when I read the "Letters to the Editor" in the Lafayette Journal and Courier, at how many writers--so wrapped

up in their personal preoccupations--convince me NOT to agree with them. Why? Because they commune with themselves, in writing so self-centered and so personal that it alienates me.

Personal writing, like any writing intended for an audience beyond the writer, sounds personal because it has been crafted to sound that way. As the Haber transcripts show, making writing sound personal is hard work. And the sooner our students learn that, the more successful their paper voices will be.